

Defining CES Practices in an Elementary School

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The Common Principles, originally developed and applied to high schools, guide schools to evaluate what is happening and strive, through reflection and common understanding, to seek improvement. What distinguishes the application of the Common Principles in an elementary school? And what makes a CES elementary school different from other elementary schools? An examination of Windsor Elementary School sheds some light on those differences.

Windsor Elementary School is one of 13 elementary schools in the Elyria City Schools, a mid-sized urban school district just west of Cleveland, Ohio. Students are between kindergarten and sixth grade and include students with special education diagnoses ranging from learning disabilities to multiple handicaps. A Title I school, Windsor is one of the largest schools in the district. The school scores well on state achievement tests.

Windsor Elementary School began exploring the Coalition for Essential Schools in 1992 as a way to improve student performance at a time when state accountability was starting to come into practice in Ohio. Windsor became affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1998 through an on-site review process conducted by the Ohio Center for Essential School Reform. Staff members embraced CES and have actively shared their work through attending and presenting at the Fall Forum. And CES has provided consistency during times of transition; the school has seen four leadership changes since first embarking on Coalition work. I was principal at the school until 2005, and the school continues to engage in CES work led by the current principal, Mr. Richard Ackerman.

As at other Coalition elementary schools, Windsor creates a culture that encourages staff members to be creative and willing to do what it takes to teach their children well. School improvement work within a CES framework must recognize the unique strengths that individual teachers bring to the improvement process. Over the years, teachers have embraced a focus on helping students to use their minds well, setting high expectations for all students, personalizing learning, and creating a tone of trust because they experience a culture in which they examine their classroom practices, actively looking for strategies that improve student success. As teachers focus on "attending to individual student needs," they generate energy and professional pride.

Teachers support each other in their pursuits of excellence. Windsor currently has four National Board Certified staff members and a winner of the Ohio Technology Teacher of the Year award. Rigorous teaching and learning occurs with a constant eye on the whole child. Student as worker is a metaphor that applies not only to classroom work, but in artistic and musical areas as well. Teachers seek grants and take risks as they work to improve their craft. At various times during past years, Windsor teachers participated in building-based action research that studied changes in the primary grades curriculum, creating a focus of in-depth content work applied to first and second grade literacy in language and math, the use of student-led conferences for students as young as second grade, the addition of listening conferences early in the school year, and the application of technology by students to learn and create content artifacts.

A closer look at Windsor's practices and achievements demonstrates how the Common Principles are applied at Windsor and how CES looks at an elementary school.

Each student should master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge.

Several years ago, the state of Ohio revamped the state achievement testing process at the elementary level with a focus on reading and math skills. The initial assessment of student progress was at third grade with a reading test early in the school year. The question was: how best to prepare students to achieve well on the

third grade test while preparing them to be eager, active learners?

At the time of the change the Elyria City Schools had in place a comprehensive curriculum for all elementary grades (reading, writing, math, social studies, and science). Could the curricular offerings in the lower grade levels be reduced to essential skills? How would this “less is more” approach affect the overall student performance if the curriculum in grades one and two were focused on reading and math literacy? How would a curricular change help to personalize learning?

Windsor teachers presented a proposal to the district superintendent, Dr. Jean Harper, which sought to reduce the curriculum in first and second grades to reading and math. In the process, teachers would be able to personalize education for each first and second grader through a balanced literacy approach to reading and a guided hands-on approach to math literacy. To assess effectiveness, teachers would match student state test performance results against similar district schools.

There was some risk in the proposed change, but teachers were confident that designing a first and second grade experience that limited the number of essential skills and areas of knowledge would benefit students in the long run. The staff members’ response was pure CES work at its best. Creating more depth than breadth in the curriculum would allow children to build a strong foundation in literacy and math skills that would reap benefits later when students were exposed to multiple subjects and asked to demonstrate proficiency. Teachers were also willing to document their work and examine data to determine if the results were acceptable.

The results of a three-year action research study demonstrated reading and math test scores that were among the highest in the school district. Simplifying the academic goals in first and second grades proved to be successful and led to a reduction of curricular content and essential academic focus throughout the school district. Over the past several years, the gains identified in first and second grade continued as these children moved through various grade levels. Building a strong literacy base when students are young allows teachers and students to dedicate more time to challenging academic inquiries in subsequent years. Students could now be “workers” in the upper grades.

Students should have opportunities to exhibit their expertise to families and the school community.

Students work hard in classrooms every day. How can that work be highlighted? How can parents and others see the results of student academic effort in ways other than reviewing report card grades? At Windsor, there is opportunity for students to “show off” at each grade level through exhibitions. Beginning in kindergarten, students are given chances to demonstrate to parents and other students what they are learning; kindergarten students are invited to “read” to older students as they begin their academic career. First grade students are paired with sixth grade students to exhibit their work products. First grade parents are invited to school to see the types of work students are doing using technology, and students are asked to show their parents what they have done in the computer lab.

Second grade students construct Power Point presentations on inventions and biomes and invite younger students to see their work products. Second grade students also hold an exhibit evening for parents. Parents are asked to participate in the grading of biome presentations using a rubric that guides students as they construct their presentations. Third grade students create an event called Kid City, a recreation of Elyria in the gym. Students learn about the community and construct miniature homes and public buildings that are placed on a large outline of Elyria. Students then invite other grade levels and parents in for tours, giving the third graders an opportunity to exhibit what they have learned about the history of the community.

Fourth grade students have classroom exhibitions with reports about the state of Ohio as the focal point for presentations. Again, younger students are invited to see the exhibitions and parents are invited to attend class presentations. Fifth grade students hold science exhibits and presentations in social studies. Student journals and art work are on display at an evening exhibit that is based on an outdoor education field trip. Fifth graders also present readings from their journals for parents, family, and other students, and they participate in student-assisted parent conferences, demonstrating what they are learning using Power Point presentations and other learning artifacts.

By the time students reach sixth grade, they have participated in a number of exhibitions and presentations

in a number of different subjects. Sixth grade students conduct student-led conferences in the fall. They also support younger students as those students develop and prepare for presentations in first and second grade. An evening Egyptian exhibit and countries of the world presentation serve as culminating presentations for parents, family and the rest of the school.

Once a year, the school building is turned into an art museum during the spring fine arts exhibition at which they present a strings concert and songs from around the world. Parents are invited to tour the building and observe the display of work from students at all grade levels.

The school's goals and expectations should apply to all students.

Coaching teachers to work across grade levels and disciplines toward the same goals requires time and patience. A key to creating this commitment was the Collaboration for Student Success (CSS) group. On their own time, teachers meet to discuss classroom goals and share pedagogical strategies in reading and writing. At times, every grade level was represented as topics and student work at different grade levels were discussed and examined.

Under the guidance of first grade teacher Ken Hughes, CSS work examined ways to improve student literacy. Teachers worked to develop a reading resource area where teachers at any grade level could access texts organized by reading level. Teachers volunteered to digitally record student reading groups as they examined the use of essential questions as guides for their reading and literature classes. The recording was placed on a DVD and was available to other teachers to share techniques and test new ways of organizing the classroom for increased student performance. The result was a commitment throughout the building to emphasize reading and writing literacy at all grade levels. Teachers developed a building curriculum map, and sought links to literacy and writing in other content areas.

Staff members also collaborated in implementing new technology and creating technology opportunities for students at all grade levels. Teachers at Windsor see technology as a motivational and creative tool for students to apply content work. Encouraged by Mary Karlovec (Ohio's Technology Teacher of Year in 2007), Media Specialist Anne Michael, sixth grade teacher Laurie Lakocy, and fourth grade teacher Carrie Ziegman, technology is an essential element of all student exhibits staged by all grade levels throughout the building.

The tone of the school should be one of trust and decency.

Trust and decency begin at Windsor when families first send students to school. Teachers ask first grade parents to attend listening conferences in early September. At the conferences, parents talk about their children – what they like, who they are, what they are good at – and teachers just listen. The conferences are the first step toward creating trust with families and building home-school relationships. Listening conference opportunities are extended to parents at other grade levels as well.

Developing student demonstrations and exhibits, creating opportunities for parents to attend activities during and after school, linking literacy practices and technology to content curriculum maps and examining student work and classroom practices take a great deal of time and energy. It takes commitment and dedication from teachers to personalize teaching for students and improve the craft of teaching in thoughtful and purposeful ways. While these examples cited from Windsor Elementary School occur in various manifestations at other CES elementary schools, they are distinctly different from the "typical" elementary school experience and are a clear expression of the Common Principles in an elementary school context. At Windsor and other CES elementary schools, a culture of trust and respect springs from a dedication to examining teaching practices using the Common Principles as the framework and springboard for a learning community that believes in its efforts to create the conditions for all students to succeed.

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